

TEMPE – More than 100 veterans learned the latest news on much-needed increases to services for veterans and outreach to those at risk of suicide – while posing questions of their own -- at a town hall hosted by U.S. Rep. Harry Mitchell and U.S. Rep. Chet Edwards of Texas on Tuesday.

Rep. Edwards, who chairs the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction and Veterans Affairs, has earned national recognition by both the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion for spearheading the largest increase in funding in the 77-year-history of the Department of Veterans Affairs. Those increases have allowed the VA to hire 2,018 new doctors and 6,549 new nurses, as well as 3,100 new processors to tackle a backlog of more than 400,000 claims.

“Congressman Edwards is a true champion for veterans and I feel really fortunate that he was able to join us for this event,” Mitchell told the crowd at Tempe’s American Legion Post 2. “I’ve been honored to work with him on issues that will improve the quality of healthcare and benefits for millions of veterans.”

Rep. Mitchell, who chairs the Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, also gave a congressional update on his push for the VA to do more significant outreach on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and suicide prevention. Mitchell screened the VA’s a new suicide prevention public service announcement for the gathered veterans. That commercial, which features actor Gary Sinise, is expected to be released nationwide before the end of the year.

Edwards, who has dedicated his 18-year career in Congress to issues involving veterans, said he appreciated having an ally like Mitchell in his push to bring more resources and reforms to the VA.

“We have an all-volunteer military, so veterans issues are national security issues,” Edwards said. “How we treat our veterans today will determine how strong our military is in the future. Harry understands that and he has done a remarkable job for veterans.”

Edwards joked that he was “a little jealous” that Congressman Mitchell attained his Oversight and Investigations subcommittee chairmanship as a freshman. “I was in Congress for 16 years before I landed a chairmanship,” Edwards said. “But oversight is one of the most important functions of Congress, and there isn’t any aspect of the VA that’s not under the jurisdiction of his committee. That’s why he’s held five times more hearings than his predecessor.”

Dozens of veterans also spoke directly to both congressman, posing questions about benefits, VA policies, and other issues. State leaders from both the American Legion and VFW were on hand, as well as Donald Moore, Director of the Phoenix VA Healthcare System, who helped answer several questions.